Chicago Theological Seminary
Commencement Address
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It is no exaggeration to say that I am who I am in large measure because of Chicago Theological Seminary. When college graduation loomed, along with the necessity of making some kind of decision about what to do next, I hadn't the foggiest notion of what "next" might be. I had a degree in Government and a vague interest in religion. A college religion course was something of a revelation to me: it had never occurred to me that religion could be an academic discipline nor that there were peculiar creatures called religious scholars. The possibility that my vague interest might translate into a vocation as a minister didn't seem either plausible or possible. My advisor, who, by happy coincidence, was a graduate of the Federated Theological Faculty of the University of Chicago, which included this place, a grand experiment in ecumenical theological education, suggested that I take a year out and come to Chicago. "But I don't want to be a minister" I protested. "Oh, that doesn't matter,"' he assured me. "They don't care about that." In retrospect - (isn't it interesting how clearer things are in retrospect?) - in retrospect that was probably my "burning bush" experience. By chance, a notice on the large central bulletin board offering graduate school and job opportunities for graduating Seniors, caught my attention. Dean Robert Moore from CTS would be on campus to talk to anyone interested in Theological Education. I screwed up my courage, rehearsed all the arguments against what still felt like a preposterous notion and made an appointment. Some may still remember Bob Moore. He wore thick glasses, tweed jackets with patches on the sleeves, smoked a pipe. He was not what I expected. When I told him I didn't want to be a minister, sure enough, he said, "That doesn't matter." When I said, "I have no money" he said, "We can deal with that." When I said "I'm married and need something more than a dorm room" he said, "we handle that all the time." And then he said something like - "the fact that you are here means that you are wrestling with something important. Theological Education is not only about ministry. It's about helping you deal with the questions you are asking about the meaning of your life. Don't you think you owe yourself at least a year - to do that?"

And so I signed up. And without ever seeing the place, my wife and I packed all our earthly belonging in a 1957 Ford and headed to Chicago and CTS. Bob Moore's promises were all kept: a tuition fellowship, an apartment in an old house on the corner of Kimbark and 58,th and a job to pay the rent - and consistent, patient attentiveness to all my doubts, misgivings, objections and all my arguments against even being here - that I now know was a particular form of love. Sue went to work for the

President, Howard Shomer, I got a job as a night janitor. CTS took us in - and I am everlastingly grateful.

That is a very long-winded way of saying "thank you" to President Alice Hunt, members of the Board of Trustees, Faculty - you - graduating Seniors for the honor of allowing me to share this very important occasion with you.

I proceed without illusion this morning. A few years ago a major university surveyed its alums ten years after graduation to discover what they remembered about the occasion. Both the identity of the speaker and the content of the Commencement Address, I recall, came in dead last.

It is a good thing to have no illusions, particularly in my business. Nevertheless, let's get on with it.

I like to read history and biography. One of my favorite anecdotes is an entry in the personal diary of Meriwether Lewis, dated April 7, 1805. Lewis and William Clark were leading an expedition, inspired by President Thomas Jefferson, to find out as much as they could about vast new territories recently purchased from France.

The expedition proceeded by water from Pittsburgh to St. Louis and beyond in canoes and most important of all, a large keel boat which carried supplies, weapons, ammunition, food and a secure refuge. But now they had run out of navigable water somewhere in the Dakotas. The keel boat could go no further. From here on they were on their own. Lewis watched the boat turn around and float down the river, out of sight, and that night wrote in his journal:

"The picture which now presented itself to me was a most pleasing one, entertaining as I do, the most confident hope of succeeding in a voyage which had formed a darling project of mine for the last ten years, I could but esteem this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life" (Stephen Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, p. 212).

"Happy" is not the word that comes to mind. "Anxious," "worried," "scared to death" seem more likely. It's difficult to imagine a more precarious, uncertain, dangerous moment than standing on the edge of a vast and frightening unknown and watching all visible means of support, safety, security disappear down the river.

Not a bad metaphor for this occasion . . . You sitting there in your graduation garments, surrounded by loving families and friends - after something like twenty years of education, launching now on your "darling project" whatever that turns out to be, while the security of the classroom,

the seminar hall, the coffee shop and bookstore, the faculty that cared, supported, nurtured, and yes, loved you - is in the process of turning around and floating down the river, soon out of sight.

If the Mainline Protestant Church is part of your project, the future is at best uncertain. The church that ordained me when I graduated from this place is gone. Presbyterian, United Church of Christ Congregationalist, Episcopalian - the Colonial "Big Three" were still predominant in American Culture. The Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church was on the cover of *TIME* magazine for partnering with Episcopal Bishop James Pike to propose an ecumenical collaboration - merger of the mainline denominations and it was newsworthy - enough for the cover of *TIME*. Today we are sidelined: having lost half our members, our national bureaucracies downsized over and over again. Frederick Buechner said that maybe the best thing that could happen to the church was for it all to be washed away by a great hurricane - all the church pulpits and pews, the Presbyteries and District Conferences, the buildings and executives, the strategic plans, all the church bulletins and curricula - washed away, until all we had left was each other, and Christ, which was all we had in the beginning. Some days I think what Buechner described is actually happening.

Phyllis Tickle argues, in her book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, that every 500 years the church holds the equivalent of a rummage sale: from the Jesus Movement, to Gregory the Great 500 years later, to the Great Schism, to the 16th Century Reformation: huge upheavals at approximately 500 year intervals. Some scholars observe that this pattern extends on back, from Jesus to Exile to monarchy to Exodus, roughly every 500 years. So - if Phyllis Tickle and other scholars are right about this, that puts us right in the middle of the biggest ecclesiastical upheaval since the Reformation - an Ecclesiastical Rummage Sale. The good news, Tickle says, is that when the dust settles, the older institution is leaner and more faithful and stronger. Beside it is a new institution, new expression of the Gospel, and as a result the Christian faith expands and the whole Church grows.

That's not comforting for those of us who are in the part of the church that is contracting, getting leaner, particularly - people are just jumping in - unless, of course, you like a challenge and have the moral stamina and a strong and creative imagination - the courage to be happy as you are watching your security structure float out of sight and the faith, the trust, that something bigger and more profound than any of us can see yet is happening.

Something new is struggling to be born, "groaning in labor" as St. Paul put it. You're graduating into it at exactly the moment when the old denominations aren't working all that well, the old parish system no longer

fits post modern life, theological education is wondering what kind of church it is supposed to be training leaders for. We have to learn how to be church all over again and you are the ones who will do it. It's already happening in South America and Africa and Asia, where Christianity is growing so rapidly it has burst the seams of the old paradigm. It's happening here as Megachurches with flexibility and social media savvy address the needs of post-modern women and men with creativity and high energy. And it happens here and there even in the traditional church, when faithful leaders transform old structures into new structures.

Don't give up on the church. Whatever else you do - argue with it, critique it, deconstruct it; but don't give up on it. Michael Jinkins, the new President of Louisville Seminary, suggested in a recent paper that the church's best days are ahead of it and he remembers Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sitting in a Nazi prison cell, pondering the future of the church. If anyone had reason to give up on the church it was Bonhoeffer. "The church to which he had given his energies was in shambles." Some had sold out completely and became part of the Nazi apparatus. His own Confessing Church had been driven underground, its leaders harassed and in prison (see Jinkins).

In his cell Bonhoeffer turned his attention to, of all things, a doctrine of the church. As he had come to understand Jesus Christ as "the man for others," so Bonhoeffer believed the church is for others, never itself. He wrote: "The Church is only the church when it exists for others. The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating but helping and serving."

God knows, the world needs a church that understands itself in those terms. Our nation desperately needs a church that knows it exists, as its Lord did, for others: not a church that exhausts its energies in arguments about theological orthodoxy, a church investing energy trying to impose its will on this amazing, diverse culture of ours, starting and fighting culture wars with simplistic resolutions for issues most thoughtful people struggle with: a church, opposed to scientific research into stem cells, opposed to women's right to reproductive choice or even resources for family planning, a church fighting bitterly about what part of God's good creation is good enough to be ordained, a church looking foolish and irrelevant. I love something Bill Coffin said: "The Bible tells us to be 'fools for Christ,' not damned fools!" There is emerging evidence from sociologists of religion like Robert Putnam in his new book, *American Grace*, that people are sick of moralistic, judgmental, homophobic religion and hungry for the real thing: the authentic thing, the church that exists for others.

Now, I confess that as I was preparing this, I came to the sudden realization that the last thing you need is one more exercise in social

ecclesiastical analysis. You have had enough of that, far more astute and scholarly, than anything I could generate. As I tried to recall what concerned me most when I was sitting where you are sitting this morning, as the Civil Rights Movement was gaining traction and ministers were starting to demonstrate and get arrested; as the Vietnam War was heating up, my major question was the same question I brought with me when I arrived: "Should I be doing this? Am I here for the right reasons? And does my being here have anything to do with God?"

I was so uncertain about those questions which are, of course, about the matter of vocation and call, that I began actively to pursue other options, graduate study in another field: Education, Law School. And in the middle of it all my mother sent me a poem, Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven*. I don't think it's great poetry, but for some reason my mother sent it to me at the moment I was pretty sure that God (if there was a God, and I wasn't at all sure about that) - that God cared or even knew I was sitting behind a desk in a small apartment, in an old house on the corner of 58th and Kimbark in Chicago, Illinois, at the very moment I was trying to convince myself that I was in the wrong place, pursuing the wrong project. From *The Hound of Heaven*:

> "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
> I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
> I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
> Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears . . ."

And at the end of the poem:

> "I am He whom thou seekest."

It is difficult to talk about, but I propose and assume that, in some way, God found you and intruded in your life and claimed you and gave you a project.

People will be surprised and disappointed to learn that you weren't struck by lightning and didn't hear a voice in the night telling you to enroll in Chicago Theological Seminary; that you struggled with your vocational decisions like everybody else; that the project God gave you, your call, is embarrassingly short on details; that you still wonder half the time whether you are doing what you are supposed to be doing. God finds us - you and me - in an itch you can never quite scratch, an intellectual curiosity and a spiritual hunger that are never quite satisfied. God finds you and gives you a project in your impatience with the way things are in the church and the world. God finds you when you find yourself angry with injustice, with tears in your eyes and resolve in your heart when you read the morning paper . . . Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, enhanced interrogation techniques, tax breaks for the wealthiest and cuts in health care, and Head Start and

education for the poorest. God finds you - your call comes every morning over coffee and the newspaper when you realize that while you are not in charge of the world, you are in charge of your one and only life, and that God expects you -calls you - to live it fully, with joyful faithfulness, responsibility . . . and to live it for others.

The promise is that you will know finally the meaning and purpose of your life when you invest it fully, give it away to the one who has called you by name, who holds you in the palm of loving hands, who promises to be with you every day of your life . . .

“I could but esteem this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life” Meriwether Lewis wrote.

And that is my prayer for you.
God bless you on your way.